Can UT Austin Play a Role in Cuba's Academic Future?

And Vice Versa?

by Jonathan C. Brown

"TE AGRADEZCO QUALquiera cosa que puedas hacer para el pueblo cubano [We are grateful for whatever you can do for the Cuban people]." Thus responded 83-year-old Ramón Castro, the avuncular elder brother of Fidel and Raúl, as Dr. Terri Givens briefed him during her visit to Havana in February 2008. Dr. Givens had just informed Mr. Castro about the Letter of Intent that she, as Vice Provost for International Programs of the University of Texas, had just signed with her counterpart at the Universidad de La Habana, Dr. Cristina Díaz López.

The agreement (*convenio*) facilitates the exchange of professors, researchers, and graduate students between the University of Texas and Cuba's flagship university. This *convenio* will increase the number of UT academics researching in Cuba and attending conferences there. UT also will invite more Cuban professors to the Austin campus. The agreement especially calls for more exchanges in the sciences. To that end, Charles "Chip" Groat, Interim Dean of UT's Jackson School of Geosciences, already has begun to confer with scientists at the Universidad de La Habana. As yet, no undergraduate student exchanges will be pursued under this agreement. "Our relationship with the Universidad de La Habana will ensure that our faculty researchers and graduate students will have access to the materials they need to conduct their research," says Vice Provost Givens, "but we can also hope that intellectual exchange will lead to better understanding and a chipping away of misconceptions on both sides."

Dr. Given's s luncheon with Ramón Castro included Jonathan Brown,

Associate Director of the Teresa Lozano Long Institute of Latin American Studies, and Florida businessman John Parke Wright. The latter, who arranged the luncheon, has known Ramón Castro for ten years. (Wright is working to reestablish cattle industry relationships between Cuba and the U.S. and has been exporting top dairy and beef cattle to Cuba under a legal exception to the U.S. trade embargo.) Congress passed a law in 2000 that exempted food and pharmaceuticals from the boycott that the U.S. government has imposed on Fidel since 1960. The only catch: Cuba cannot pay for these goods with rum, cigars, or nickel. It can pay for U.S. food and prescription drugs—in advance—only with hard currency earned from hosting non-American tourists or selling its products to China, Canada, Mexico, and the European Union.

Ramón Castro's interest in cattle stems from his management of the Castro family farm in the late 1950s while brother Fidel ran the Revolution from the Sierra Maestra and Raúl commanded a guerrilla front in the Sierra del Cristal. Both mountain ranges are located far from Havana in eastern Cuba. In contrast, Wright's interest in Cuba developed from his family's earlier shipping and cattle business in pre-revolutionary Cuba. His relatives owned La Candelaria, one of the island's best cattle ranches, also located in the easternmost Oriente province. Fidel confiscated both La Candelaria and Ramón's farm under the land reform law several months after the Revolution triumphed in 1959. However, since then, Cuban economic performance under socialism has not kept pace with other reforms in education, income and property redistribution, and health care. "Our work in agriculture aims to help increase the quality and quantity of Cuba's livestock industry with cattle and cooperation from Florida, Texas, and Alabama," Wright says. "Also, we have a joint cooperation agreement with the Holstein Association, USA, and with dairy cows being supplied to Cuba from Vermont, Maine, New York, and Pennsylvania." The country's economic partnership with the Soviet Union until 1990 and with Venezuela since 2000 and its trade relations with every other country of the world have not substituted for the capital and markets of Cuba's closest neighbor.

Ten American presidents beginning with Dwight D. Eisenhower have maintained the

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boycott in an attempt to undermine Fidel's regime. It has failed to do so. Fidel did not step down until surgery for an intestinal blockage prompted him to cede power to brother Raúl in August of 2006. I was in Cuba for the first time when Fidel fell ill (see the College of Liberal Arts *Life & Letters*, Winter 2007–2008). I then returned in October 2007 to negotiate the terms of the *convenio* with Vice Rector Díaz López. On that second trip, I met Ramón Castro for the first time—at another luncheon arranged by John Parke Wright. My friend from Florida also introduced me to the Cuba he loves. We went to Mass at the seventeenth-century La Iglesia Catedral (which had been visited by Pope John Paul II and former president Jimmy Carter) in historic Old Havana. We played "Guantanamera" with a street band, Wright on harmonica and I on the bongos.

Later, Wright took me horseback riding at the farm of Sierra Maestra veteran Miguel Ginarte. We rode with Ginarte and a dozen *guajiros* (country folk) flying the flags of Cuba and Texas, which are strikingly similar. A photographer from the *New York Times* showed up to record the event as part of the newspaper's coverage of the Havana Trade Fair, which Wright was attending. I turned my horse around each time the photographer pointed the camera in my direction; wary of political backlash back home, I was not eager for publicity before the *convenio* was signed. My worries were unfounded. (Texas Agricultural Commissioner Todd Staples was soon to lead a delegation of state officials and exporters on a much-publicized visit to Havana, which Wright also helped to organize following his speech at UT, "Doing Business with Fidel," in March 2007.) The mission of Staples's visit: to increase Texas's share of rice, grain, and cattle sales. Therefore, I missed an opportunity for fleeting fame. My image did not appear in the equine photo of Ginarte and Wright that appeared in the *New York Times* on November 12, 2007.

With these developments as a backdrop, Ramón Castro thanked Dr. Givens for anything she could do for the Cuban people. But exactly what can the Universidad de La Habana receive in its partnership with the University of Texas? What can UT achieve? The historian in me cannot but take the long view.

Fifty years ago, the Universidad de La Habana traditionally served the middle and upper classes of this nation of an estimated seven million people. The youth of privileged birth cut their political teeth there. Student leaders at Cuba's flagship university expected to win future elections as members of congress, fill high government positions, and compete for the presidency. Founded in 1728, the university became the site of patriotic struggle for independence from Spain, achieved after U.S. occupation from 1898 to 1902. In the midst of a depression of the sugar industry, university students in 1933 used violence to help unseat unpopular President Gerardo Machado. Fidel Castro followed in this university's political traditions. In the 1940s, he attended the university's prestigious law school and directed the youth wing of an opposition party. He was campaigning for a congressional seat in the 1952 elections when former president and general Fulgencio Batista staged a *golpe de estado* and installed himself in power. Within days of the coup, Universidad de La Habana students launched the first protest marches against Batista. Raúl Castro enrolled briefly in university studies and participated in a few protests. Fidel suggested he join the Cuban communist party, which Raúl did. In the next few years, student protests became more violent. They met vicious repression from the police, but failed to dislodge Batista from power.

Fidel was practicing law at this time and did not participate in university agitation. Nonetheless, he resolved to raise the protests to the level of armed confrontation. When he organized and led the attack on the Moncada army barracks, located in the eastern city of Santiago, on July 26, 1953, few of his armed followers had attended the University of Havana. The soldiers repulsed the attackers and captured and executed half of their number. Fidel and Raúl escaped with their lives, to be captured later and incarcerated at Modelo Prison on the Isle of Pines. In 1954, Batista's presidential pardon freed the Castro brothers and other political prisoners. They left Cuba and reunited in Mexico City, where Fidel trained another group of Cuban revolutionary commandos. There Raúl befriended the Argentinean Ernesto "Che" Guevara. He introduced Che to Fidel, who invited him along as the troop's only foreign combatant.

In the meantime, some members of the student movement decided to separate from the Universidad de La Habana and form an urban guerrilla group, the Revolutionary Directorate. "Strike at the top" became their strategy. Within months of Fidel's return to the island to set up a guerrilla base in the sierras of eastern Cuba, the ex-students decided to attack in Havana. In March 1957, they staged an armed assault on Batista at his residence in the Presidential Palace. These youthful militants

Left to right: 1) John Parke Wright on harmonica and the author on bongos join a Cuban street band after Sunday Mass in the historic Habana Vieja section of Havana. 2) The author checks out one of the many picture books about Ernesto "Che" Guevara that are on sale at the Plaza de Armas in Habana Vieja. 3) Miguel Ginarte greets Vice Provost Terri Givens at a finca outside Havana. A veteran of the revolutionary battles of the late 1950s, Ginarte raises horses and cattle.

met stiff resistance from the palace guards, and many were killed and captured. The defeat marked the end of student militancy, except for periodic bombings and sabotage of Havana's power grid. Survivors of the Revolutionary Directorate fled to the countryside, later to unite with Fidel's guerrilla forces led by Che Guevara. Together they marched into Havana when Batista fled the island in the early morning hours of New Year's Day 1959. The point is: university students contributed to the overthrow of Batista.

The first year of the Revolution initiated great changes at Cuba's venerable Universidad de La Habana. The Castro government decided to deemphasize traditional studies of philosophy, religion, and law. Resources flowed into more practical studies in industrial management, economics, agronomy, engineering, and the sciences, often with the support of Soviet and East European educators. The revolutionary army under the command of Comandante Raúl Castro initiated a student militia at the university in order to defend the Revolution. Fidel's government established scholarships for the sons and daughters of peasants and workers. Students volunteered to work in vegetable gardens and cane harvests. From 1959 to 1963, some students of the middle and upper classes left the Universidad de La Habana as their families fled into exile. Cuban universities thereafter concentrated on developing its higher educational goals of providing socially relevant training and nurturing development of a socialist society.

Then crisis struck in 1991. The Soviet Union and the Eastern Bloc governments collapsed, and their trade and educational exchanges to Cuba abruptly ended. Deep budget cuts prevented the upgrade of science labs, technical facilities, and research collections. Now, nearly twenty years later, a recovering Universidad de La Habana again reaches out to the world. Vice Provost Givens, businessman John Parke Wright, and I witnessed evidence of this outreach.

Vice Rector Díaz López had invited us in February not only to sign the *convenio* but also to attend the convocation celebrating the 280th anniversary of the founding of the Universidad de La Habana. It was held two days after our luncheon with Ramón Castro. We comprised one of several delegations attending from abroad. Others represented Peking University and universities in Colombia, Peru, England, Spain, France, Germany, and Canada. UNAM and the Universidad Politécnica attended from Mexico. Already, hundreds of Cubans have obtained Ph.D.s from Spain, Mexico, and Canada. Cuba's closest collaborator, Venezuela, sent a total of 750 delegates! As for the United States, officials arrived from American University, the Massachusetts College of Pharmacy and Health Science, Tulane University, and the University of North Carolina–Chapel Hill. "Thank you for coming to help us celebrate our anniversary," said Rector Rubén Zardoya Loureda at the end of his speech during the plenary session. "Cuba is your home. [The Universidad de La Habana is your home.] Viva la universalisación de la universidad."

What is this "universalization" of which the Cubans speak? Additional explanation came from the speech of Carlos Rodríguez Castellanos, Director of the School for the Science of Materials, with which UT's Chip Groat has now established linkages. The concept of universalization involves international collaboration. "Universities have become important agents of innovation, and continued collaboration with Latin American universities has already proved crucial in the development of pharmaceuticals and vaccines to the benefit of all children of the world," he concluded. Cuban institutions of education strive to provide scientific advice to manufacturing and service sectors of the economy. They also have a mission to serve society. The decentralization of higher learning to urban and national subcampuses aids in delivery of knowledge.

Officials later informed us that the Universidad de La Habana trains 36,000 students in extensions throughout the nation's capital city. It also extends its educational benefits to 1,500 foreign students at the undergraduate level and nearly 200 at the graduate level—free of cost. Moreover, the government sends its trained educators and medical personnel to work in Africa and Latin America as a Cuban equivalent of the U.S. Peace Corps. Finally, the university seeks to serve the city's retired workers with enrichment classes in cultural subjects. One administrator described his institution as "una universidad para toda la gente, y para toda la vida [a university for all the people and for all their lives]." Therefore, Cuban faculty members seek to learn from the experiences of others and to share their achievements with foreign colleagues.

The *convenio* signed by Vice Provost Givens and Vice Rector Díaz López recognizes that the goals of our universities are complementary in many ways. With this acknowledgment in mind, the University of Texas at Austin and the Universidad de La Habana already have begun exchanges. History Ph.D. candidate Benjamin Narvaez spent the spring 2008 semester in Cuba completing research for his dissertation on Chinese contract workers in nineteenth-century Cuba. The Cubans too are coming to UT. Dr. Rafael Hernández, editor of Cuba's leading intellectual journal, *Temas*, arrived in fall 2007 to teach UT students about the Cuban perspective in its relationship with the United States. A student in psychology, Daybel Panellas, is utilizing her fall appointment as visiting researcher to complete her Universidad de La Habana doctoral studies. If U.S. visa restrictions end, more Cubans will be able to attend UT's academic conferences. In return, UT faculty members will be handing out UT baseball caps and exchanging ideas in research colloquia in Havana.

Perhaps we should be thanking Ramón Castro and the Cuban people for anything they can do for the University of Texas.

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"We Cubans know that the fate of our nation and humankind depends on our ideas, and the universalization of education is the only way to advance our social and scientific development. We cannot ignore our colleagues abroad as they too strive to solve common problems. We come here to share with you our ideas as well."

—**Dr. Rubén Zardoya Loureda**
Rector of the Universidad de La Habana
February 11, 2008